



Introducing the new Enhanced VPAT®

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2009, the [Information Technology Industry Council](#) (ITI), the premiere industry organization for global IT accessibility, asked [HiSoftware](#) to develop a specification for an XML file that could be used for ITI's Voluntary Product Accessibility Template® (VPAT®). The VPAT is a tool used to document a product's conformance with the accessibility standards under Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. In February, HiSoftware proposed two alternative VPAT specifications, which ITI reviewed with its membership over the following months, making its final selection this September. This enhanced VPAT has been embraced by the U.S. General Services Administration as a way to simplify government market research on IT products with accessible features.

This document provides a brief discussion about the need for a common XML VPAT specification. This document also introduces the ITI XML VPAT Authoring Tool, which was created to make it easier for vendors to create VPATs using this standard. It is important to note that while the underlying structure of the VPAT has changed providing a number of benefits, the actual VPAT format and content that users are accustomed to utilizing has remained the same. It's your VPAT, enhanced.

The XML VPAT specification was prepared by Ken Nakata, the Director of Accessibility Consulting Practices (ACP) of HiSoftware, an industry leader in accessibility solutions, particularly in the area of web content and standards. Nakata was formerly the lead attorney in the Federal government for Section 508 implementation and is a noted accessibility technologist.

WHY AN XML VPAT SPECIFICATION?

Developing an enhanced VPAT offers a number of key benefits, both for government and industry.

- **Better Market Research.** The key advantage for government is to facilitate market research by procurement officers. This results in better adherence to the Section 508 standards. At the same time, because the "look and feel" of the new VPAT does not change, moving to an XML format will not disrupt current government processes.
- **Simpler and More Uniform VPATs.** For industry, this effort will ultimately simplify the VPAT process and ensure that VPATs are uniform, both inside a company and between companies.
- **Better Internal Accessibility Governance.** Just as VPAT data in XML format can be mined by government buyers, they can also be used internally to develop benchmarks and other metrics to evaluate products within a company and identify soft spots. For instance, a company can rapidly review different product lines and identify where additional resources may be required to improve accessibility.
- **Supports the VPAT as an International Model.** The successful XML VPAT format can be adapted and utilized in both U.S. and global markets to convey information.

OVERVIEW OF XML AND SELECTION OF THE NEW VPAT MODEL

Perhaps the greatest advantage—and disadvantage—to XML is its flexibility. As set forth by the W3C, XML has relatively few rules for a document to be “well-formed,” the key attribute to an XML file (See <http://www.w3.org/TR/2006/REC-xml-20060816/#sec-well-formed>). The exact rules for accomplishing this task are left purposefully vague to ensure that almost any kind of data can be represented in XML format.

The enhanced VPAT structure includes a machine-readable code that enables computers reading the VPATs to easily distinguish between VPATs written to the original Section 508 standards and later standards. This provides a number of benefits:

- **More Flexibility—Particularly for Different or Changing Standards.** The biggest advantage is that the names of the tags are not tied to the standard that they address. This means that this structure can be used for any kind of Supplier Declaration of Conformity (SDOC) initiative, regardless of the taxonomy used to organizing information.
- **Ability to Regroup Standards as Necessary.** The upcoming Section 508 standards may not follow the current numbering scheme. Industry and government may find that the VPAT is more useful if it reorganizes the presentation of that information. Because the tags used in this XML specification are generic, they can be reorganized as ITI and GSA see fit.
- **Versioning to Automate Comparing Related Data.** Providing tight version control (as noted above) makes it possible for the new VPAT to evolve over time.

ITI XML VPAT® AUTHORIZING TOOL

The ITI XML VPAT Authoring Tool, also developed by HiSoftware, is a Web-based application that lets users fill in a familiar, easy-to-use form and instantly create a VPAT that fully conforms to the XML VPAT specification. The Authoring Tool will be hosted either on a Federal government or ITI server.

Benefits

- **Fast and Easy XML VPATs.** Makes it easy to quickly create enhanced VPATs.
- **No XML Knowledge Required.** Enables creation and updating of VPATs without any expertise in XML.
- **Easily Adaptable to Different Standards.** Provides flexibility to revise VPATs to meet changing requirements using the same familiar online tool.

Features

- Allows users to create a VPAT and save it to their hard drive.
- VPATs can be easily edited by uploading to the online authoring tool and repeating process.
- No data is saved on a server, thus ensuring security and privacy of corporate assets.
- No difficult-to-remember usernames or passwords are required.

Availability

The ITI XML VPAT Authoring Tool is available through the Information Technology Industry Council (ITI). For more information contact Ken Salaets at ITI at 202.626.5752.

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